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# Arab Regional Action Plan for Sustainable Development Data: progress in implementation

**Summary**

At its twelfth session held in Beirut on 4 and 5 April 2017, the Statistical Committee of the Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia (ESCWA) adopted the Arab Regional Action Plan for Sustainable Development Data. The Arab Regional Action Plan was based on the Cape Town Global Action Plan for Sustainable Development Data, which was adopted by the United Nations Statistical Commission at its forty-eighth session.

The present document provides the status of implementation of the Arab Regional Action Plan. The Executive Committee may wish to take note of the contents of the document and of the efforts undertaken by the ESCWA secretariat to support member States in building their statistical capacity to monitor the implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals.

## Introduction

1. At its twelfth session held in Beirut on 4 and 5 April 2017, the Statistical Committee of the Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia (ESCWA) adopted the Arab Regional Action Plan for Sustainable Development Data,[1] which was formulated around the six strategic areas delineated in the Cape Town Global Action Plan for Sustainable Development Data:[2]

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| Strategic area 1: | Coordination and strategic leadership on data for sustainable development |
| Strategic area 2: | Innovation and modernization of national statistical systems |
| Strategic area 3: | Strengthen basic statistical activities and programmes, with particular focus on addressing the monitoring needs of the 2030 Agenda |
| Strategic area 4: | Dissemination and use of sustainable development data |
| Strategic area 5: | Multi-stakeholder partnerships for sustainable development data |
| Strategic area 6: | Mobilize resources and coordinate efforts for statistical capacity-building |

2. In the regional plan, the objectives and proposed implementation actions were adapted to regional priorities, and to mandates by the General Assembly and the Economic and Social Council. Indeed, General Assembly resolution 71/313 recommended that national statistical systems explore ways to integrate new data sources into their systems to satisfy new data needs of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development; that all activities of the global statistical system be conducted in full adherence to the Fundamental Principles of Official Statistics 2; and that regional commissions intensify their support for strengthening data collection and statistical capacity-building, including capacity-building that strengthens coordination among national statistical offices, in line with previous resolutions on the subject, including resolutions 69/313 and 68/261. In turn, Economic and Social Council Resolution 2006/6 called upon Member States to intensify their efforts to strengthen national statistical capacity in order to produce reliable and timely statistics and indicators for the monitoring of national development policies and strategies, and of the implementation of commitments and the achievement of all development goals at the national, regional and international levels.

## STATUS OF IMPLEMENTATION OF THE ARAB REGIONAL ACTION PLAN FOR SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT DATA

### Strategic area 1. Coordination and strategic leadership on data for sustainable development

1.1 *Strengthen inter-agency coordination in the region*

3. A number of regional and global actors in official statistics are active in the Arab region. In November 2017, the United Nations Regional Coordination Mechanism for the Arab States established the Task Force on Sustainable Development Goals Data.[3] The Task Force, co-chaired by the regional office of the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) and ESCWA, comprises the League of Arab States and United Nations agencies that have a significant statistical component in their mandates and work programmes.

4. The Task Force held its second meeting in Beirut, on 27 and 28 June 2018. Discussions focused on the requirements of national, regional and global reporting processes on Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) indicators. Participants emphasized the importance of minimizing the burden on already over-stretched national statistical systems through identifying core sets of data, so as to set a data-sharing platform and engage

[1] E/ESCWA/SD/2017/IG.1/4(Part II).

[2] See Annex I of the background document presented to the forty-eighth session of the Statistical Commission, available at https://unstats.un.org/unsd/statcom/48th-session/documents/BG-2017-3a-HLG-E.pdf.

[3] See https://www.unescwa.org/sites/www.unescwa.org/files/u522/workplan_sdg_data_tf_0.pdf.

in capacity development and technical cooperation. On the regional level, members of the Task Force also agreed on the need to identify a regional core set of data that reflects the regional strategic direction and ensures proper SDG monitoring. This process should take into consideration regional data flows, data gaps, and the role of United Nations country teams in providing statistics and data. Task Force members underlined that existing frameworks, such as lead indicators of the International Conference on Population and Development (ICPD), could be helpful to formulate SDG data strategies. The Task Force will work on the formulation of a regional strategy on statistics and data for the SDGs, to be finalized in 2019.

5. The Task Force also agreed to undertake and regularly update the inventory of completed, ongoing and planned statistical activities from 2016 onwards. The inventory would serve as a main regional coordination tool for statistical activities, and would also feature a mapping of the status of regional data flows.

1.2 *Establish links between inter-agency and intergovernmental coordination*

6. Members of the Task Force on Sustainable Development Goals Data recommended that the ESCWA Statistical Committee act as the leader of intergovernmental coordination for SGD statistics and data in the Arab region. The Statistical Committee will continue to be the platform for such coordination while ensuring the involvement of Task Force members.

**Strategic area 2. Innovation and modernization of national statistical systems**

2.1 *National and regional strategies for development of statistics*

7. ESCWA has cooperated with the Partnership for Statistics in the 21st Century (PARIS21) in undertaking assessments of the readiness of national statistical systems in interested countries. The objective was to support the implementation of the SDGs through the provision of reliable, relevant and timely statistics and data. In Egypt and Jordan, the assessments resulted in the formulation of national strategies for development of statistics (NSDS). ESCWA has also contributed to PARIS21 *NSDS Guidelines*, namely to the chapter on "fragile States".[4]

2.2 *Data sharing*

8. Approval of the principles of SDG data flows by the United Nations Statistical Commission has been postponed to March 2019. Nevertheless, the ESCWA secretariat has formulated a vision for regional data flows that respect national sourcing of data, considering the role of national statistical offices and of custodian agencies as defined in the Cape Town Global Action Plan. The vision will have to be adjusted to the global principles upon their adoption, but the ESCWA secretariat has considered that it was important to initiate the dialogue. It presented its vision proposal at a meeting on the Arab Development Portal, which was convened by the United Nations Development Programme in Beirut, on 23 April 2018, and at the above-mentioned June 2018 meeting of the Task Force on Sustainable Development Goals Data.

2.3 *Geospatial information*

9. The ESCWA secretariat brought the issue of integration of geospatial and statistical information to the Consultative Meeting on the Implementation Framework for the Environmental Dimension of the 2030 Agenda in the Arab Region, held in Cairo from 18 to 20 September 2017. Prior to the meeting, ESCWA had undertaken a survey on the use of geospatial information in member States. A second round of the survey was launched in 2018, with a view to refining the information based on the recommendations of the Consultative Meeting.

[4] PARIS21, *NSDS Guidelines: Guidelines for the Elaboration of a National Strategy for the Development of Statistics* (April 2018). Available at http://nsdsguidelines.paris21.org/NSDS-GUIDELINES-full-lang-en.pdf.

10. In order to build partnerships on geospatial information, the ESCWA secretariat became a participant organization in the Group on Earth Observations (GEO),[5] similarly to other United Nations regional commissions. ESCWA is also acting as secretariat and facilitator of the United Nations Initiative on Global Geospatial Information Management for Arab States.[6]

2.4 *Transformative agenda for official statistics*

11. As part of the efforts of its efforts to seek new data sources that would complement censuses and classical statistical surveys, and in order to respond to the increased data demand brought by the 2030 Agenda, ESCWA has established a big data team within the secretariat. The first phase of its work aims at building internal capacity in new data sources for official statistics and other data-related areas. The team has started collecting and analysing information on activities in other regions and within global initiatives, and has launched a series of seminars for ESCWA staff.

**Strategic area 3. Strengthen basic statistical activities and programmes, with particular focus on addressing the monitoring needs of the 2030 Agenda**

3.1 *Economic statistics*

12. The ESCWA secretariat continues to support national statistical systems in the implementation of the 2008 System of National Accounts. In this context, it has initiated work on reflecting Islamic finance in national accounts. Inspired by that effort, the United Nations Statistics Division has established a global task force on Islamic finance in 2017. A proposal for a standardized approach of the subject was discussed at a workshop held by ESCWA in Beirut, in August 2018. The ESCWA secretariat has also contributed to a workshop on Islamic finance organized by the Statistical, Economic and Social Research and Training Centre for Islamic Countries (SESRIC), which was held in October 2018 in Ankara.

13. The ESCWA secretariat has facilitated regional efforts towards the establishment of statistical business registers. In that context, it completed a project under the ninth tranche of the United Nations Development Account on short-term economic indicators in December 2017.[7] The project focused on capacity development for the production of quarterly indicators in sectoral economic statistics, including the creation of an information technology tool for intra-annual indicators.

14. In the area of price indices, the ESCWA secretariat has completed the annual collection of data for the International Comparison Programme, in cooperation with national statistical offices. This effort allows for the calculation of national purchasing power parities on the basis of real data rather than through extrapolation and retropolation. Participating countries were able to produce comparable subnational purchasing power parities. Work on price statistics also includes efforts towards the adoption of a harmonized consumer price index and towards harmonizing data collection for temporal (consumer price indices) and spatial (purchasing power parities) price indices.

15. In the area of sectoral economic statistics, the ESCWA secretariat has established a regional dashboard on trade statistics, which has been included by United Nations Headquarters in Comtrade Labs.[8]

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[5] The Group on Earth Observations (GEO) is an intergovernmental organization working to improve the availability, access and use of Earth observations for the benefit of society. For more information, see http://earthobservations.org/index2.php.

[6] See http://www.un-ggim-as.org.

[7] The United Nations Development Account was established by the General Assembly as a mechanism to fund capacity development projects of the economic and social entities of the United Nations. It provides a bridge between in-country capacity development actors and United Nations Secretariat entities.

[8] See https://comtrade.un.org/labs.

3.2 *Demographic and social statistics*

16. The ESCWA secretariat has pursued its efforts in demographic and social statistics. In 2017 and 2018, it undertook assessment and advisory missions to several member States in the context of such work. In 2017, it organized an expert group meeting on record linkage to assess completeness of death registration (Beirut, 21-27 September) and a regional workshop on quality evaluation of civil registration and vital statistics in the Arab States (Beirut, 9-10 October). In 2018, it held a regional training workshop for developing vital statistics reports from civil registration (Beirut, 10-11 October). Participants in these events called for the establishment of a coordination mechanism between relevant international and regional organizations to implement additional capacity development activities. Further work in civil registration and vital statistics would require additional resource mobilization.

17. In 2018, ESCWA issued the Regional Guidebook to Improve Disability Data Collection and Analysis in the Arab Countries: Implementing the Washington Group Questions on Functioning,[9] which was prepared in cooperation with regional statisticians and policymakers and members of the Washington Group on Disability Statistics. This Guidebook was referred to as a leading practice at the Second United Nations World Data Forum held in Dubai, from 22 to 24 October 2018. The Guidebook and related capacity development activities resulted in increased availability of data on persons with disabilities. The ESCWA secretariat has also developed, in cooperation with the League of Arab States, an Arab framework for disability statistics of around 100 indicators,[10] which links the SDGs with the United Nations Convention on Rights of Persons with Disabilities. It was adopted at the Inter-agency and Expert Group Meeting on Improving Disability Statistics in the Sustainable Development Goals, held in Cairo from 18 to 20 September 2018.

18. The informal Arab Group on Population and Housing Censuses has been actively engaged in discussions on challenges in using technology in censuses, and the integration of the geospatial dimension into censuses. In 2017 and 2018, it has held several meetings and workshops and facilitated transfer of experience in that area, leading to improvement in the quality of data, as electronic questionnaires allow validation of data at the time of collection.

19. In support of SDG 5, the ESCWA secretariat has updated the regional questionnaire on statistics on violence against women (VAW), based on the latest revisions by the World Health Organization which included additional SDG indicators on VAW. The ESCWA secretariat is also developing a handbook on SDG 5-related statistics to assist countries in the collection and compilation of accurate and comparable data, based on examples of good practice from selected countries, which will be presented at the November 2018 Inter-Agency and Expert Group on Gender Statistics meeting in Tokyo.

3.3 *Environment statistics*

20. During the above-mentioned Consultative Meeting on the Implementation Framework for the Environmental Dimension of the 2030 Agenda in the Arab Region, held in Cairo from 18 to 20 September 2017, the ESCWA secretariat advocated the implementation of the System of Environment Economic Accounting.

21. In addition, the ESCWA secretariat published a special issue of the Compendium of Environment Statistics in the Arab Region, entitled *Climate Change-related Statistics in the Arab Region: A Proposed Set of Indicators*,[11] focused on data and methodologies applicable to the Arab region.

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[9] E/ESCWA/SD/2018/MANUAL.1.

[10] E/ESCWA/SD/2018/WG.1/7. The framework was adopted at the Inter-Agency and Expert Group on Improving Disability Statistics in the Sustainable Development Goals, Cairo, 18-20 September 2018.

[11] E/ESCWA/SD/2017/3.

**Strategic area 4. Dissemination and use of sustainable development data**

4.1 *Modernizing data dissemination and communication*

22. Over the past four years, the ESCWA secretariat has worked on establishing a new statistical information system. The resulting data portal is intended to make available a wide variety of statistics and data on sustainable development. Its core consists of a data management module (DMM) comprising the data warehouse, data transformation tools, an analytical tool and a reporting tool.

23. A data dissemination module (DDM) was implemented in 2017 and 2018, to serve external users and data dissemination. The DDM allows ESCWA to create and customize dashboards by statistical subject matter, and to combine data from different areas of statistics, such as combining economic and social statistics in cross-tabulating gross domestic product (GDP) and health data, or GDP and education data, or industrial output and household income data, into a single dashboard. DDM users will be able to download data, store analysis results and create custom-made dashboards for their own use.

4.2 *Statistical literacy*

24. A regional workshop on sound institutional environment, cooperation, dialogue and partnerships for the production and utilization of SDG indicators was held in Tunis, from 6 to 8 February 2018. It brought together senior statisticians, including heads of national statistical offices, with policymakers from ministries of planning and of the economy, and highlighted best practice in adjusting the institutional environment of official statistics to the needs of the 2030 Agenda. The workshop resulted in recommendations on implementation of the Fundamental Principles of Official Statistics.

25. The ESCWA secretariat has obtained funding under the United Nations Development Account for further improvement of statistical glossaries. The project aims at establishing a standard Arabic language terminology for statistical terms, which will be proposed for adoption by the ESCWA Statistical Committee. This would contribute to resolve concerns about the variable quality of translation of statistical terminology.

26. In addition, ESCWA has completed the translation of Tier I and Tier II SDG indicators, including their metadata, according to the Tier Classification by the Inter-Agency and Expert Group on SDG Indicators.

**Strategic area 5. Multi-stakeholder partnership for sustainable development data**

5.1 *Regional partnership*

27. The ESCWA secretariat is pursuing various partnerships to strengthen regional capacity for sustainable development data. In the framework of the Task Force on Sustainable Development Goals Data, the secretariat has partnered with United Nations agencies participating in the Regional Coordination Mechanism, the League of Arab States and its specialized agencies, the Arab Institute for Training and Research in Statistics (AITRS), SESRIC, the Statistical Centre for the Cooperation Council for the Arab States of the Gulf (GCC-Stat) and others.

5.2 *Promote national partnership*

28. The ESCWA secretariat has continued to strengthen the links between policymakers and national statistical offices by extending invitations to the former to workshops, seminars, meetings and other events.

**Strategic area 6. Mobilize resources and coordinate efforts for statistical capacity-building**

6.1 *Inter-agency partnership*

29. ESCWA succeeded to partially outset a lack of resources for statistical capacity-building by partnering with other regional statistical agencies. For example, in 2016 and 2017, more than 30 events were co-organized

with the League of Arab States, AITRS, SESRIC, the United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women (UN Women), the United Nations Settlements Programme (UN-Habitat), and other partners.

6.2 *United Nations development programmes*

30. ESCWA is one of the implementing agencies of the Statistics and Data Programme under the tenth tranche of the United Nations Development Account. The Programme consists of four pillars including means of implementation, demographic and social statistics, economic statistics and environment statistics.

6.3 *Partnership with funds and development banks*

31. ESCWA has obtained a grant from the World Bank in support of price statistics and other areas of economic statistics. ESCWA and the World Bank plan to approach together potential regional donors to secure sustainability of funding for the related programmes.

32. The Executive Committee may wish to take note of the implementation of this Plan and the efforts undertaken by the secretariat to support member States in building their statistical capacity to monitor the implementation of the SDGs.

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